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Encountering History

JULES CHAMETZKY

THE THIRTIES AND AFTER: Poetry, Politics, People, 1930-1970. *By Stephen Spender. Random House. 217 pp. $10.*

Early in his new memoir Stephen Spender poses a question that has engaged literati and ideologues at least since the 1930s and after. How is it that the great figures of modernism—Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Pound; throw in Wyndham Lewis—heroes in their time of the avant-garde, models for the artist's assault on bourgeois complacencies, turn out in their public and political lives to be such reactionaries, even Fascists? Of course to his talented generation of poets at Oxford in the late 1920s—the extraordinary group of Auden, Betjeman, Day-Lewis, MacNeice, Rex Warner—"The Waste Land" was seen "simply" as being about the end of Western civilization, and not at all, such was their ideological naivete, "political."

Later in the 1930s, when the young writers of Spender's generation turned Left, Eliot's work could still be seen as a valid diagnosis of our civilization's malaise; it was not the poet's duty to offer a solution, and if Mr. Eliot turned to his famous triad of classicism in art, royalism in politics, catholicism in religion for his own salvation, it was perfectly logical for young poets like John Cornford to turn to Marxism and communism and, along with Julian Bell, Christopher Caudwell and Ralph Fox, die in the International Brigade in Spain. Spender and many of his slightly older group flirted briefly with communism (Orwell put them down as "the pink pansy Left"), then turned from it with one degree of animus or another.

Spender is thoughtful about these matters, tries to be fair to the revolutionaries and the reactionaries (the title of one long section of his book), even though the reactionaries come off somewhat better. One caustic sentence of Spender's, out of context, might turn the reader against his evaluations: "If Auden and Isherwood," he writes, "had written a play on the theme of Cornford and Bell, one can well imagine that the deaths of these heroes on the battlefield would have been seen as the finale of a dialogue with a chorus of artistic mothers and Bloomsbury aunts." He is on much more sympathetic gound when he concludes that the reactionaries can be understood as writing out of their tragic sense of modern life whereas "the Cornfords and Bells lived and died the tragedy."

Spender's memoir—really a collection of short articles, reviews, journal entries, introduced by essays offering a background to each of the decades—is best where his genuine affections are engaged and his gift for the concrete comes into play. His description of beleaguered but culturally rich London during the war; or his evocation of its (and his) dangling-man mood at the brink of war; and of mad and ruined postwar Germany conveyed through weird conversations and odd encounters, affect one's imagination like poems and good fiction; and his reminiscences of Auden, Eliot, Cyril Connolly are models of cleareyed and unillusioned homage. It is all a very good read, especially in the early parts, but with the '50s, and '60s a certain brittleness begins to be felt.

The '50s, he says, were a negative period in his own life, "largely taken up with anti-communism." He had in the early '50s "a strong feeling of the complete rotting away of England." Of course, hovering over all of this is the unsavory *Encounter*-Congress of Cultural Freedom-CIA affair. As the one respected co-editor of the journal, and one who was to suffer from the revelation of the CIA role in supporting his magazine, Spender provides, for my taste, a rather too short and disingenuous account of the matter.

He briefly describes the Congress of Cultural Freedom, which sponsored *Encounter*, and its "remarkably intelligent" secretariat of anti-Communists in Paris. According to him, he and Irving Kristol successfully resisted their effort to occasionally influence editorial policy. The journal maintained its independent existence, he says, and in any case, the political articles were the domain of the American editors (whom besides Kristol, he fails to name or discuss). When rumors arose that one of the forty different American foundations supporting the CCF was a CIA conduit—Spender does not say it was a chief source of funds, although a remark he reports by Julian Fleischmann, that "it was he who paid for *Encounter*," through his Farfield Foundation, suggests that it was—Spender was disturbed enough to question Fleischmann and his Foundation director about it, only to receive an abusive letter in reply. Still, it was not until *The Nation* and *Ramparts* in 1966 exposed the CIA connection that Spender resigned (by then, however, he was only "corresponding editor." Frank Kermode had taken over earlier, and he too quit after the *Ramparts* exposé).

I do believe that Spender was something of a dupe in all this. What remains disturbing, however, are the lessons he or we draw from the experience. Even now, all Spender is prepared to take a stand on is that as a director of an enterprise whose source of funds were unknown to him, he was forced unwittingly into the deception of others.

> What would one think of the position of a member of Parliament who was a director of a firm in which the source of money provided was concealed from him? He would be put in a position in which deception practiced on him resulted in his deceiving others.

Well and good; but the critical question left unasked, not to say unanswered, is what if he had known that *Encounter* was being supported by the CIA? In the ambiance of the late '50s and early '60s, would he have dissociated himself from it? So deeply were even liberal anti-Communists of the period caught up in and compromised by a Manichaean vision of the world that the answer might not do much to bolster disinterested service of truth that is the only justification of intellectuals.

Furthermore, the sketchiness of his treatment suggests that Spender does not quite perceive the depth of feeling and repugnance aroused in the American intellectual community by those revelations. I recall a protest in 1972 signed by over seventy well-known writers and editors (a list that begins with Hannah Arendt) against the Ford Foundation's offering *Encounter* a grant for the purpose of aiding its distribution in the United States. There was probably a certain amount of nativism and protectionism motivating the protest, but the protesters were "made uneasy, as well, by the political implications of this effort to promote and expand *Encounter*'s influence in this country." Perhaps it was all the last glow of the '60s, but the response was genuine.

As for Spender's treatment of the '60s, it too can exasperate an American reader. The tone is occasionally Olympian (we are described as having such a propensity to take things so *in*tensely) and he seems to deplore that "frenetic minority" which ultimately

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Jules Chametzky, who has edited The Massachusetts Review, *teaches literature at the University of Massachusetts.*

pulled Johnson down with its "chorus of rage and contempt." The admiration for Johnson is frankly bewildering—"A man of great sensitivity concealed under a rhinoceros hide exterior," whom he compares to a Roman emperor from the provinces. A more earthy American judgment might be that he was a familiarly corrupt character on a grand scale, a hustler from the sticks.

I cannot leave a discussion of Stephen Spender on this sour note. His previous writings, the wonderful autobiography *World Within World*, lines and images from his poems that explode still in the mind, his continued effort to bridge the chasm between private sensibility and public life (for the sake of enlarging the one and humanizing the other) must be honored. He quotes several times Auden's lines dedicated to him:

> Private faces in public places
> Are wiser and nicer
> Than public faces in private places.

More than most engagé people in our difficult era Spender has retained his liberal and civilized virtues. I wish only that he would apply them to the difficult questions of the '50s and '60s as well as to the '30s and '40s. □